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gender and politics in the uk: banished to the sidelines

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Abstract

This article provides a case study analysis of the provision of gender and political studies education in the United Kingdom. The article notes the lack of gender and politics modules available to students at the undergraduate level and links this to the under-representation of women within the discipline but also to the wider political and economic context. The article reflects upon the extent to which the study of gender and politics has been promoted within the UK, arguing that despite the key role played by national groups such as the Political Studies Association's Women and Politics group, the wider discipline is yet to view gender as a core part of the curricula.

Keywords gender and politics; political science; feminism

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Despite uncertain economic times, higher education is big business in the United Kingdom (UK). A recent report found that the UK higher education sector contributed an output of over £73 billion and more than 750,000 full-time jobs. This equates to 2.8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP).¹ And yet despite this success the Conservative Government has slashed funding to Universities, leading institutions to freeze wages, provide precarious employment contracts and to cut courses and degree programmes. Such a political and economic context has particular implications for the teaching of gender and politics, all too often viewed as a ‘luxury’ rather than as a core part of the curriculum - not least in terms of the hiring of staff who both *can* and *want* to offer such modules. Those teaching gender and politics modules are overwhelmingly likely to be female academics, a group that is under-represented within politics departments in the UK (Bates *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, women are more likely to be on fixed-term rather than permanent contracts (Bryson, 2004) and less likely to be found in positions of seniority and management (Lalage, 1999; Doherty and Manfredi, 2006). This power dynamic is a difficult context within which to sustain, let alone increase, gender and politics courses.

This article maps out the provision of gender and political studies education in the UK; in so doing we highlight the paucity of gender and politics units relative to the number of Universities which run degree programmes in politics.² We link the relative absence of gender and politics education to the under-representation of women academics within the profession but also to the wider political and economic context, which provides an inhospitable climate for the teaching of a more critically engaged political analysis. We finish by exploring the extent to which the discipline *qua* discipline has sought to address and promote the study of gender and politics.

THE 'STATE' OF THE DISCIPLINE

There are no higher education institutions in the UK where you can take an undergraduate degree in either gender or women's studies (although some universities offer gender as a specialism; for instance, Swansea University offers a degree in English Literature with Gender whilst the University of Warwick offers Sociology with Gender). Whilst politics as a discipline has continued to flourish, with increasing numbers of providers offering degrees in the subject, gender and women's studies was largely killed off during the end of the 1990s as gender scholars were incorporated into other disciplines. This reflected wider societal trends in feminism and women's activism during this period as the UK movement largely went into abeyance. Whilst at the postgraduate level several universities offer taught and research programmes in gender, these either tend to be specialised courses or interdisciplinary programmes encompassing arts, humanities and social sciences. For instance, the London School of Economics (LSE) hosts the interdisciplinary Gender Institute, with several affiliated postgraduate courses, whilst the University of Bristol offers an MSc in Gender and International Relations (IR). Given that the focus of this special edition is on gender and political science we will concentrate our attention on the undergraduate level.

According to the UK's Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS), there are 91 universities and colleges that offer an undergraduate degree in politics.³ Undergraduate degrees in politics tend to include modules that fit within the traditional strands of the discipline: comparative and national politics; political theory; IR; and, research methods. Given increased competition for students, universities are increasingly making public the

information about their courses and what a potential student on their politics degree could expect from the programme. In order to explore the extent to which gender and politics is a feature of politics degree programmes in the UK, we undertook a survey of the websites of all the relevant departmental websites to catalogue the module options available. This involved going to the website of each politics department in the UK and checking to see if they offered a specific module on a gender-related subject at the undergraduate level. The aim was to identify which universities, and how many, offer modules on gender and politics (broadly conceived). Although the options that universities offer depend on staff appointments, which can fluctuate depending on the institution, because the sites are updated regularly we are confident that such a method of data collection accurately reflects the extent to which gender and politics modules are taught across the UK.

Of the 91 institutions that offer a degree in politics only twenty-nine – less than a third – offer a module on gender and politics. It is not a compulsory unit at any of those Universities. In other words, students studying politics at two-thirds of UK Universities will not be offered the opportunity to study gender and politics. Of those twenty-nine institutions, only six offer more than one module on gender and politics: Birmingham; Bristol; Leeds; Leicester; London South Bank; and York. No university offers more than two courses. The modules on offer can typically be grouped into the following areas: elections, representation and government; feminist theories and activism; gender and IR; gender and sexuality; masculinities; and gender and development. Such a categorisation only serves to underline the breadth of issues and areas covered by gender and politics. That so few institutions offer even *one* module highlights the gaps in political studies education in the UK.

An absence of a specific module on gender and politics does not mean that gender doesn't feature at all during the degree programme. Indeed, it is likely that a module on, say, introduction to political ideology will have a week on feminism (usually making up the final week of the course). Arguably, this approach could constitute a 'mainstreaming' of gender teaching by incorporating it into core or compulsory modules. However, as Foster *et al.* observe in their analysis of 16 'top-ranking' politics and IR departments, only 8.9 per cent of the modules offered in such departments include at least one week on gender or feminism. As these authors suggest, gender might more accurately be described as being sidelined rather than mainstreamed (2013: 578).

In all, such an approach does not, we contend, provide sufficient depth or breadth of the range of issues, ideas and approaches to gender and politics that can be covered in (at least one) dedicated unit. Moreover, the exclusion of feminist perspectives from core teaching in politics and IR means the exclusion of perspectives that challenge traditional ways of thinking about politics and power (Foster *et al.* 2013). That gender and politics modules are not taught widely across UK universities should be cause for concern for those keen to see a more critical reading of what constitutes 'the political'.

EXPLAINING THE ABSENCE

It is our contention that the relative absence of gender and politics modules can be explained by a number of interrelated factors that include both attitudes towards the field but also the increasingly feminised nature of precarious employment contracts within the sector. Gender and politics is still considered to be a niche area within political studies as a discipline (Childs

and Krook, 2006); indeed, a cursory glance at leading textbooks on political studies in the UK reveals that gender, if it features at all, constitutes at best a minor frame of analysis. In short, it is not considered 'mainstream' political studies. As a result, those who undertake research within the field are less likely to be employed on permanent contracts, as departments look to appoint academics who cover the core research and teaching areas, and are more likely to be on precarious temporary contracts with little freedom over the courses that they teach. Reflecting wider patterns within academe, contract research is both feminised and classed (Reay, 2004) with black women in particular struggling to find equality within the Academy (Mirza, 2006). Research has also noted that women are often dissuaded from pursuing an academic career, whilst the often-times incompatible nature of academia, in particular research excellence, with childcare is off-putting for a lot of women, particularly in the early stages of their career (Raddon, 2002; Reynolds, 2012).

With regards to political studies we know that women are under-represented within the discipline, constituting just 30.8 per cent of political scientists (Bates *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, research has highlighted that 25 per cent of female political scientists are employed as teaching or research fellows, compared to just over 10 per cent of male political scientists; meanwhile 29 per cent of male political scientists are professors compared with just 12 per cent of female political scientists (Bates *et al.*, 2012: 4). Women are also under-represented in management positions within higher education: this is problematic for those who seek to increase the opportunities to implement feminist and equity-oriented policies (Deem and Ozga, 2000). All of these factors are also influenced by wider economic and political changes to the UK higher education sector which has made it difficult to present an adequate 'business case' for such modules, not least when concerns about 'market

contribution’ and ‘employability’ trump more scholarly concerns (Collini, 2012). Such a context means that those who seek to offer a feminist and critical take on political studies and IR become further marginalised.

And yet, we know from our own experience and from discussions with colleagues who offer such modules that they are extremely popular. Offering students of both sexes an opportunity to analyse and critically reflect upon the gender regimes that govern and shape our individual and collective politics is intellectually rewarding for both staff and students alike. Furthermore, a renewal of feminist activity in the UK, particularly amongst young women, means that there is scope and a potential ‘market’ for such modules which continue to do well in US universities (Evans, 2015). The ‘integration’ of gender into other departments has been piecemeal and has ultimately left students to pursue their intellectual curiosity about gender and politics outside of the lecture hall and seminar room; for instance, there has been a resurgence of interest and active engagement in university feminist societies.⁴

At the broader level there is also, we contend, an appetite for modules that seek to address the current failings of neoliberal states and markets. The various political crises, both economic and democratic, that have swept around the world, and the key role played by young people in helping organise and sustain the current wave of resistance, have precipitated a more critically engaged student body who are no longer content to learn the ‘canon’ of political studies. There is an appetite for politically engaged normative teaching (something

that tends to be a feature of gender and politics modules) as well as for modules that provide students with the means by which to challenge the status quo.

REFORMING THE DISCIPLINE

The Political Studies Association (PSA) is the leading UK membership association for scholars, students and interested parties in the study of politics (broadly conceived). Following the 2015 elections, eight of the sixteen members of the PSA's Executive Committee are now women, and Professor Vicky Randall, a leading scholar on women and politics, has previously served as its Chair (2008-2010). Within the PSA there are two key sites for those who are interested in resisting the masculine-dominated nature of political studies in the UK. Such a resistance is led by the PSA Women and Politics Specialist group (discussed below) that works closely with other umbrella groups in the UK such as the Feminist and Women's Studies Association and Women in Philosophy. Interest in increasing diversity within the profession is also addressed by the Equality and Diversity Group, a sub-committee of the PSA.

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Established in the 1970s, the Women and Politics PSA Specialist Group is based upon two key objectives: 1) to encourage and mentor women within the discipline; and 2) to promote the study of gender and politics to students, scholars, policy makers and the general public. It is one of the largest specialist groups within the PSA (with a membership of 130 as of 2015) and is an extremely active network, winning the PSA's newly created prize for best Specialist Group in 2015. The group has long prioritised ensuring that gender is an integral part of both the teaching and research of politics; being an active Specialist Group within the

PSA has effectively allowed the group to promote and advance its core aims both within the discipline and to a wider audience. The constitution of the Women and Politics PSA Group states its further aims as follows:

- 1) to promote the study of gender and politics;
- 2) to welcome and support all women scholars of politics, irrespective of their field of interest;
- 3) to promote gender equality in the profession;
- 4) to facilitate contact and communication between scholars engaged in the study of gender and politics;
- 5) to achieve these objectives by: organizing group conferences and workshops, panels at general conferences and other events, and awarding prizes.

The range of aims demonstrates the scope of the Group. A survey of the activities undertaken by the Group over the past few years highlights the extent to which it is central to the promotion of gender and politics both within and outside of the discipline. Convenors of the group regularly give talks to schools and to university students to highlight the importance of undertaking a gendered analysis of politics. Gender and politics is broadly conceived and past talks have covered governance, IR, political theory, methodology and public policy. In order to encourage students to pursue postgraduate study of gender and politics, the Group also runs an undergraduate essay prize which seeks to recognise and reward outstanding undergraduate students who have focussed on gender and politics. The group has long communicated key research findings to a wide range of audiences through the media. In addition to the online presence of many of the members, the Group also has a very active

online presence.⁵ All of these things have helped professionalise the study and promotion of gender and politics within the discipline.

The Women and Politics PSA group have lobbied the PSA to introduce a 'no all-male platform policy' at their annual conference and has also been instrumental in arguing for childcare provision at events. The PSA in turn established the Diversity and Equality Working Group in order to make the association, and the wider political studies community in the UK, 'more accessible to people from across the social spectrum'.⁶ This was deemed necessary in the wake of reports of the under representation of women in the profession, but also following a report conducted in 2009 which revealed that only 4 per cent of research students and staff within politics departments were black and minority ethnic.

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Despite the disappointing lack of gender and politics modules on offer at UK universities, it is our contention that the institutionalisation of gender and diversity within the PSA through the Women and Politics group and also the Diversity and Equality Working Group is a central way in which to promote the study of gender and politics. Indeed, feminist critical actors (those who act to bring about women-friendly change; see Childs and Krook, 2009) who have been involved with the PSA, the PSA Women and Politics Group and the Diversity and Equality Working Group have been vital to raising the profile of the field within the discipline.⁷ Such individuals have, moreover, had an important effect on their own departments through leadership roles, mentoring and providing space on the curricula for gender and politics. However, convincing all departmental heads and faculty managers that

gender and politics is a core part of the discipline remains a wider collective problem for the discipline.

CONCLUSION

This article has highlighted that gender and politics does not feature widely on politics degree programmes in the UK. This in itself is worrying. However, we argue that this is underpinned by women's under representation in permanent positions within political studies departments. The traditional ladder of recruitment shows both a 'leaky pipeline' with women dropping out of the profession but also a 'sticky floor' where women are more likely to be found at the more junior levels. Despite the success of the Women and Politics Group in raising the profile of gender scholars within the discipline, this has not translated into a wider acceptance of the need to include gender within politics programmes. Meanwhile, a particularly inhospitable economic context which has witnessed devastating cuts to higher education, alongside the managerialism that has accompanied the professionalization of universities, makes it harder to campaign to increase the teaching of less 'mainstream' areas of the discipline.

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About the Author

Elizabeth Evans is Lecturer in Politics at the University of Bristol. Her latest book is *The Politics of Third Wave Feminism: Neoliberalism, Intersectionality and the State in Britain and the US* (Palgrave, 2015). Her research interests include political representation, feminist activism, and elections and political parties. She is a past convenor of the PSA Women and Politics Specialist group, a member of the PSA Diversity and Equality Group and a co-convenor of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) European Conference on Politics and Gender (ECPG).

Dr Fran Amery is Lecturer in British Politics at the University of Bath. She is Co-Convenor of the PSA Women and Politics Specialist Group. Her principal research areas are in gender and women's movements in the policy process, sexual and reproductive politics, and health governance.

KEY QUOTES (for the publisher)

'Those teaching gender and politics courses are overwhelmingly likely to be female academics, a group that is under-represented within politics departments in the UK'. (p.2)

'There are no higher education institutions in the UK where you can take an undergraduate degree in either gender or women's studies'. (p.3)

‘Offering students of both sexes an opportunity to analyse and critically reflect upon the gender regimes that govern and shape our individual and collective politics is intellectually rewarding for both staff and students alike’. (p.7)

‘Despite the disappointing lack of gender and politics courses on offer at UK universities, it is our contention that the institutionalisation of gender and diversity within the PSA through the Women and Politics group and also the Diversity and Equality Working Group is a central way in which to promote the study of gender and politics’. (p.10)

Notes

¹ Universities UK (2009) The Impact of Universities on the UK Economy, available at <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/EconomicImpact4Full.aspx#VCmDUnl0zml>, accessed, 29th September 2014.

² We use the term ‘political studies’ as opposed to ‘political science’ as that more accurately reflects the nature of the discipline in the UK.

³ Although UCAS states there are 105 institutions that offer degrees in politics, we have excluded the following institutions because they do not run a single honours degree in politics or international relations, which means that the range of politics units offered is very small: University of Bedfordshire, Blackpool, Fylde College, Edge Hill University, Glasgow Caledonian, Heriot Watt, Hertfordshire, Heythrop College, University of the Highlands and Islands, IFS college, Loughborough College, Newnham College, Northampton, Open University, Portsmouth and Roehampton.

⁴ Emma Pierce (3 January 2013) 'Surge in Student Feminism' *The Telegraph*, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10548692/Student-feminist-societies-surge-Meet-the-new-generation-of-bold-hilarious-feminists.html>. accessed 16 October 2014.

⁵ Women and Politics, available at <http://psawomenpolitics.com/>, accessed 2 October 2014.

⁶ Political Studies Association, Diversity and Equality Working Group, available at <http://www.psa.ac.uk/psas-diversity-and-equality-working-group>, accessed 3 October 2014.

⁷ Examples include Joni Lovenduski, who has acted as a consultant on gender and politics for various organisations including the European Commission and the Council of Europe, and Fiona Mackay, who directs the Feminism and Institutionalism International Network (FIIN)